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ABSTRACT

This issues paper, seventh in a series of eight, is intended to distill formative evaluation questions on topics that are central to the development of the higher and further education information environment in the United Kingdom. The aim of this issues paper is to provide a description of the approach of the Formative Evaluation of the Distributed National Electronic Resource (EDNER) Project to understanding implicit theories of change to allow project teams (learning resource development teams) to carry out their own exercises in "surfacing" the assumptions embedded in their own work. Revealing such assumptions results in airing differences, improving consensus, and enhancing the internal logic of the project. Surfacing the theory of change in a project begins with each team member writing down a vision of the "outcome of interest," and the circulation of these documents to all team members. A logic map is then produced of the project's theory of change, and the directed links between inputs and goals and outputs are explains. The work of explaining these links is what brings the project's implicit theory of change to the surface. The map is revised as necessary to keep the reflection of the project current. (SLD)

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# Articulating Implicit Theories of Change

**EDNER Project**

**Issue Paper 7**

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# Articulating implicit theories of change

EDNER
(Formative Evaluation of the Distributed National Electronic Resource)
Project
*Issues Paper 7*

The aim of this Issues Paper is to provide enough of a description of our approach to understanding implicit theories of change to allow project teams to carry out their own exercise in 'surfacing' the assumptions embedded in their own work. The point of carrying out such an exercise is to reveal such assumptions, so that differences within and around the project team can be aired, consensus improved and the internal logic of the project enhanced. The approach described here builds on the work of John Nash (Stanford Learning Lab), Leo Plugge and Anneke Eurelings (until recently at the University of Maastricht), and Helge Stromdahl (Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm) who are among the first people we know to have tried out 'theory-based evaluation' or 'theory-anchored evaluation' in the field of learning technologies (see Nash et al, 2000; Stromdahl & Langerth-Zetterman, 2001).

Surfacing a project's theory of change involves the following steps:

1. Each member of the project team (and ideally each important stakeholder) should write down their vision of the project's 'outcome of interest'. One way to do this is to get each person to write a document in response to a 'History of the Future' Exercise. (See Box 1.)
2. Copies of the documents thus produced should be given to all members of the project team (and ideally each important stakeholder) and a meeting held to identify common elements, identify key differences and work towards consensus about a definition of the main outcome or outcomes of interest. This should be written down.
3. At the same or a later meeting, project team members and stakeholders – usually with the aid of a facilitator - should try to create a logic map of the project's theory of change. (For more about how to use logic models to help a project tell its story about change see McLaughlin & Jordan, 1998.) An example of a project logic map is given in Figure 1
4. The logic map in Figure 1 consists of project outputs (ellipses, given on the right of the map), project activities or inputs (rectangles, given on the left of the map) and intermediate goals (rounded rectangles, in the centre of the map). The definition of the project outcomes begins (and often ends) with agreement about the main outcome(s) of interest. The inputs are the 'big ideas' brought together at the outset of the project. They may reflect resources and activities in the real world or theoretical constructs. The intermediate goals represent states of affairs that bridge between inputs and outputs. Their creation may well be the principal work of the project.

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5. Once an agreed project logic map has been produced, explain the directed links between the inputs and the intermediate goals and between the intermediate goals and the outputs. (It may help to number these links on the map and write paragraphs about each link in an accompanying document.) *The work involved in explaining these links is what 'brings to the surface' the project's implicit theory of change.*
6. Over a period, revisit the map, adding detail as appropriate and amending elements in light of experience, changing circumstances etc. Be sure to retain a copy of each main version of the map and its accompanying documentation.

**Box 1 Eliciting 'outcomes of interest'**

To facilitate this process for complex projects, we propose that the project staff write a history of the future.

*Imagine that your intervention project is completed and that it succeeded in all of its goals. You are to appear tomorrow at a press conference to explain what you have accomplished. Write a press release for distributing at this meeting, explaining in a few paragraphs what it is that you have accomplished, who is benefiting from this, why it's important (that is, what problem it solves and why this problem needed to be solved), and what it was that you did that led to or caused this success.*

After Vanezky (2000) – see Nash et al (2000).

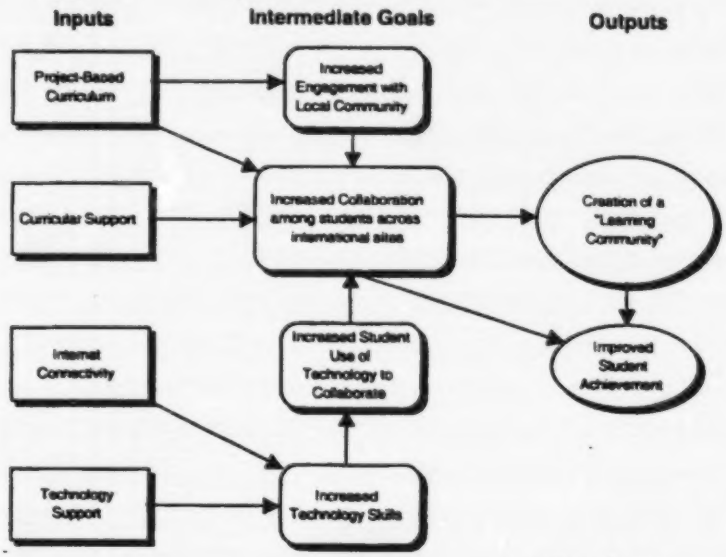


**Fig 1 Example project logic map (after Nash et al, 2000)**

## References and further reading

McClaughlin, J., & Jordan, G. (1998). Logic models: a tool for telling your program's performance story. Available: http://www.pmn.net/education/Logic.htm (2001, June 5th).



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Nash, J., Plugge, L., & Eurelings, A. (2000, November 2000). Defining and evaluating CSCL projects: managing towards evaluation. Paper presented at the European Conference on Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (ECSCL 2000), Maastricht, Netherlands.

Strömdahl, H., & Langerth Zetterman, M. (2001). On theory-anchored evaluation research of educational settings especially those supported by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) . Upsalla, Sweden: Swedish Learning Lab..

EDNER Key Issues papers are intended to distil formative evaluation questions on topics which are central to the development of the UK's higher and further education Information Environment. They are presented as short check-lists of key questions and are addressed to developers and practitioners. Feedback to the EDNER team is welcomed.

Please address enquiries and comments to the EDNER Project Team at cerlim@mmu.ac.uk

*EDNER is being undertaken by CERLIM at the Manchester Metropolitan University with CSALT at Lancaster University*

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